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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the structure and the use of language are postulated as socializing agents influencing sex-role learning in three major ways: (1) sex differences occur in language use and parallel sex-role stereotypes; (2) the language that is addressed to children is usually the language of socialization which instructs the child what to do, think, or feel; (3) the interaction between structure and language usage result in feminine or masculine forms used as generic terms to designate categories that could potentially include members of either sex. This interaction is seen, then, as delimiting androgynous possibilities. The paper attempts to show how these three socializing influences theoretically interrelate with the acquisition of self-concept, sex roles, sex-role stereotypes, and a sexist view of the world in young children. Two tables follow the text, the first giving examples of sex-role stereotyping as expressed by children, and the second giving examples of the nongeneric use of the usually generic masculine form. (CLK)

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ON "THE NURSE WAS A DOCTOR"

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The structure and usage of language are postulated here as socializing agents influencing sex-role learning in three major ways. Firstly, sex differences in language usage occur and parallel sex-role stereotypes (Lakoff, 1973). Secondly, the language addressed to children is, in general, a language of socialization that tells the child what to do, what to think, and how to feel (Gleason, 1973). Thirdly, the interaction between the structure and usage of language that results in the choice of feminine or masculine forms as generic terms for categories that, at least potentially, include members of the other sex can be seen as delimiting androgynous possibilities. Blaubergs (1974) has discussed how the generic usage of masculine terms for the entire species emphasizes the "otherness" of woman, and in many cases, is actually interpreted as exclusive of females in parallel to the sex-role stereotypes. The focus in this paper will be on how the three aforementioned socializing influences may, theoretically, interrelate with young children's acquisition of self-concept, sex role, sex-role stereotypes, and a sexist world view.

The existence of sex differences in the language addressed to young children has been disputed. Fraser and Roberts (1975) and Phillips (1973) found no sex differences in mothers' speech to eighteen-month-olds up to six-year-olds. Cherry (n.d.) confirms that there are no sex differences in the syntactical complexity of the language addressed to children, but notes that girls are spoken to more and in more diverse speech styles. Lewis and Freedle (1972) report that, although overall female infants are vocalized to more by their mothers and that this vocalization takes place in response to the female infants' vocalizations, on all other measures, including touching, holding, smiling, looking, playing with, changing, feeding, and rocking, male infants' vocalizations are responded to more frequently.

Gleason (1973) in observing code-switching in family interactions, noted further that fathers differed from mothers in how they addressed babies: fathers quite strongly differentiated their behavior toward male versus female children, e.g., they said things like "Come here, you little nut!" or "Hey, fruitcake!" while in vigorous physical play with the boys, but both handled and addressed their girls more gently. Here, as in general, the use of language parallels societal practices.

Written language also serves to socialize sex differences. Extensive documentation of sex-role stereotyping and sexism in children's books has been provided (e.g., Child, Potter, and Levine, 1946; Lichtenberg, 1973; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada and Ross, 1972; Weitzman and Rizzo, n.d.; Women on Words and Images, 1972). Noteworthy is the observation that fewer adult females are portrayed in books for higher grades than lower grades, and in masculine-stereotyped subjects such

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as science. Schotta (1974) has investigated differences in the language of females and males in elementary texts and found parallels to other measures of the portrayal of males and females, e.g., females are supportive, saying things like gee, great, use qualifiers such as I guess, I think and their questions are typified by What do you think we should do? Thus, written language also serves to convey sex-role stereotypes to children.

Sex differences shown by children parallel the differential behavior of parents towards their children. Firstly, parallel to the lack of differentiation in the syntactic complexity of speech addressed to girls versus boys, it is the case that girls' and boys' language does not differ in syntactic complexity (Menyuk, 1963; O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris, 1967) although counter claims have frequently been made. The existing sex differences seem to be more in reading, spelling, tests of grammar, and in fluent production skills (Key, 1975, p. 64; Petersen, 1974). Interestingly, cultural expectations may play a role, e.g., in Japan, the language development of boys is more advanced (Key, 1975, p. 65). However, sex differences in certain vocalization parameters occur very early: newborn boys cry more than girls (Lewis, 1972). Steinhardt, Weinrich and Webster (1973) found that the mean number of vocalizations per interval of three-month-old males was more than double that of three-month-old females or seven-month-old infants of either sex, and also conclude that females vocalize less under non-social stimulus conditions. Similarly, Lewis and Freedle (1972) conclude that at twelve weeks, female infants, though they do not vocalize more overall, differentiate whether they are being spoken to or not. This parallels findings of females' earlier greater social skills (Post and Hetherington, 1974).

Further parallels between language use and socialization include the possibility that sex differences in the form of language used may add subtly to females' learning of an inferior status. Lakoff (1973) reports that although both sexes as children learn the women's form of Japanese, boys past the age of five are ridiculed if they continue to speak it. Thus children's and women's language coincides. Similarly, Ferguson (1964) and Sachs, Lieberman, and Erikson (1973) observe that "baby talk" in both English and Arabic is perceived as more appropriately used by women than by men. Additional documentation that the use of language suggests that a female never grows up is provided by Bell (1970): in a sample of job advertisements in the Los Angeles Times, 97 ads used girl or gal while only 2 used boy. Similarly, EEOC has recently declared that the use of girl in reference to adult women employees constitutes sex discrimination (A rose by any other name. . . 1974). Finally, Sachs et al. (1973) report that judges are able to identify the voices of four-to-fourteen-year-olds as either female or male despite the absence of differences in the size of the articulatory mechanism. They suggest that "the children could be learning culturally determined patterns that are viewed as appropriate for each sex" and report that "boys had a more forceful, definite rhythm of speaking than the girls."

Thus, sex differences in both the input to and the output of children reflect sex-role stereotypes and expectations.

The second contention made here is that language is used to deliberately socialize children, and thus, since sex-role socialization is a major aspect of this process, it is used in that also. Gleason (1973), as already mentioned, has claimed that the language addressed to children between the ages of four and eight is a language of socialization that tells the child what to do, what to think and how to feel. For example, parents both asked and answered questions and they exaggerated their responses to indicate how they thought the child ought to feel, e.g. "Hey, wow, that's almost full to the top" and "Boy! That must have been fun." Use of language such as that reported by Women on Words and Images (1972), "You're certainly not up to a man's work, so you'll start as a scrubwoman," socializes sexism. The inferior status of the female is so well learned that in an experiment by Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1969), the attempt to manipulate the power of a model failed when the model was an adult female rather than a male: a number of nursery school children, in the words of the experimenters "were firmly convinced that only a male can possess resources," and therefore, the female dispensing the rewards was only an intermediary for the male model. See Table 1 for some examples of the children's responses.

Thirdly, it has been contended that the generic usage of masculine pronouns (he, his, him, himself) and certain masculine forms such as man, mankind, chairman, manpower, policeman, schoolboy is neutral as to the sex of the individual or individuals referred to. I have previously contended (Blaubergs, 1974, 1975) that, in actuality such usage serves to reflect and to reinforce sex-role stereotypes. I will summarize the basic arguments involved in this contention.

Firstly, at best, such usage is ambiguous. In many contexts, it is difficult to ascertain if a generic usage or a masculine referent is intended, e.g., from MacLeod and Silverman's (1973) survey of high school textbooks on U.S. government: ". . . not all men have the same set of values. . . . A few women who held values different from those of most other people were responsible for extending the vote to women." Does men include women in this quotation?

Secondly, generic usage is relatively rare compared to the use of the terms in contexts specifying the sex of the referent. For example, Graham (1973) has reported, that in a sample of children's books, only 42 of 940 citations of the masculine singular pronouns were cases in which the referent was unspecified by sex. Thirdly, if the linguistic notion of marking is applied to masculine-feminine pairs of words, the masculine term, partially on the basis of its generic usage is the unmarked form, which, linguistically speaking is considered more natural, closer to the norm or the ideal or the unchanged state, while the feminine term is marked linguistically and therefore is also readily viewed as the exception psychologically. Brewer and Lichtenstein's (1974) summary of the claims about marking can be readily extended to masculine-feminine pairs: 1) the name of the continuum is derived from the unmarked member, e.g., man, mankind; 2) the unmarked member is typically more frequently used (e.g., Graham, 1973); 3) the unmarked member is used to refer to the larger or evaluatively positive end of the continuum; 4) if the two forms are distinguished by an overt morphological marker, the form with the affix is the marked

form, e.g., poet, poetess. The linguistic practice of referring to personified entities that are "other" to men (e.g., ships, the sea, countries, cities, hurricanes) as "feminine" provides further support of the "markedness" and "otherness" of feminine forms. What does this mean for the child who is acquiring language and sex-typed behaviors? Klatsky, Clark, and Macken (1973) have shown experimentally that the unmarked concept is learned more readily, while numerous experimenters have found that the meaning of the unmarked word is at first synonymous with the marked form, and have interpreted this finding as indicative of the unmarked form being acquired earlier (Clark, 1971; Donaldson and Balfour, 1968; Palermo, 1974). Is the classic example, He a girl, that is used to illustrate how parents do not correct the syntax of a child's utterances indicative of the same phenomenon in the domain of masculine and feminine terms? Fourthly, and importantly, not all choices of generic terms follow the rule that the masculine form serves as the generic term. Exactly those feminine terms which are indicative of strongly feminine sex-stereotyped roles and activities are used as generics. Therefore, all other terms are enhanced in their interpretability as masculine. Linguistically, it is evident that the referent is stereotyped as feminine when either the feminine pronoun is used as in a sentence I recently heard on television--When your heart fund volunteer calls, give her a warm welcome and a generous donation--or when a sex-specifying modifier is perceived as less redundant if it is masculine as opposed to feminine, e.g., male nurse, male prostitute, male secretary, are much less redundant than female nurse, female prostitute, or female secretary. Additional feminine sex-typed roles for which the feminine form, although unspecified as such by an affix, is used as a generic might, in different idiolects, include librarian, typist, receptionist, shopper, homemaker, housekeeper, teacher, aide, virgin, and feminist.

Interestingly, the generic shifts to the masculine in many idiolects if any males, even hypothetically, are included in the group (Densmore, 1970). For example, the use of she in reference to teachers is decreasing as men enter the field. In other languages where gender specification is more prevalent, e.g., Spanish, the inclusion of any males at all makes a group masculine, e.g., hermanos which also means "brothers", is used to refer to siblings of both sexes. In English, if any males at all are included, a similar phenomenon occurs, e.g., generics such as pioneer are used only if males are included, though the entire group may be male, but if only females are being referred to, this is specified, as in the use of pioneer women (Burr, Dunn and Farquhar, 1972).

Fifthly, both in usage and in interpretation, the generic term, if not explicitly feminine, often refers to only males. Although the forementioned examples involve an ambiguity of reference, only males, or both sexes, both in usage and in interpretation, the generic often refers to males only, e.g., men only, in most idiolects, excludes women rather than plants. Table 2 provides examples of such usage. Further, Schneider and Hacker (1973) have

shown experimentally that man is not interpreted as referring to persons of both sexes but rather as referring to males: their subjects chose significantly more illustrations depicting only men for chapter headings such as Urban Man and Social Man as opposed to Urban Life and Society. All of the above arguments relate to the child's acquisition of sex-role stereotypes, even to the point of misunderstanding the language--the classic example, as the first quote in Table 1 attests, being that only boys can become doctors, and only girls can become nurses.

Table 1
Examples of sex-role stereotyping expressed by children

Tavris (1973):

"My cousin Claire, age three, was playing with a doctor's kit one day.

"Good, Claire," said her observant grandmother, Alice. "Are you going to be a doctor when you grow up."

"Of course not," said Claire. "Tommy said that only boys can be doctors. I am going to be a nurse."

Alice tried, but Claire could not be budged from her certainty.

Some time later, it happened that Claire's mother injured her foot. The two of them rushed off to the emergency hospital, where a woman doctor took care of the crisis. Claire watched silently, and later explained what happened to her amused grandmother.

"Mommy hurt her foot and we had to go to the hospital and now it's all better and guess what?"

"What?"

"The nurse was a doctor!"

Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1963):

"He's the man and it's all his because he's a daddy. Mommy never really has things belong to her. . . . He's the daddy so it's his but he shares nice with the mommy. . . . He's the man and the man always really has the money and he lets ladies play too. John's good and polite and he has very good manners."

". . . my mommy told me and Joan that the daddy really buys all the things, but the mommy looks after things."

Koch (1971):

"Feffer thinks prejudice against women entering professions like medicine starts as early as the sandbox. For example, he reports that son Ethan Feffer, age 4-1/2, practically has a battle when he says, "My mommy's a doctor." Other children, reports his father, insist that Ethan is wrong and that his mother has got to be a nurse!"

Table 2

The Non-generic usage of the Masculine Form as a Generic

. . . man's vital interests are life, food, access to females, etc.

(Fromm, in Graham, 1973)

"his back aches, he ruptures easily, his women have difficulties in childbirth"

(Eiseley, in Graham, 1973)

"How does man see himself? As a salesman? A doctor? a dentist? As far as sexuality goes, the Kinsey reports on the activities of the American male surely affect his self-image in this regard. . ."

(Murray, 1973)

"The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession--all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife, if possible."

(Fanon, in Silveira, 1972)

"The peasant is a dependent. . . Before he discovers his dependence he suffers. He lets off steam at home, where he shouts at his children, beats them, and despairs. He complains about his wife and thinks everything is dreadful."

(Freire, in Silveira, 1972)

"It was man's job to tame that wilderness, make it habitable, and exploit its riches. In the process of creating a place for himself and his family. . ."

(Eagleton Institute, in MacLeod and Silverman, 1973)

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